CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
Balourdet Quartet: "Quartet Building Blocks"
Saturday 14 September, 2024 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2024

Quartet in D, Op.64, No.5; Hob.III:63 ("Lark")
Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

1790 was an eventful year for the city of Vienna, and particularly for its most prominent musical citizen, Joseph Haydn. The Emperor Joseph II died on 20 February, ending a twenty-five year reign; he was succeeded by his brother Leopold II. On 25 February Princess Elizabeth Esterhazy died. She was the wife of Haydn's long-time employer, Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy. Bereft, Prince Nikolaus only survived her by eight months. On 28 September he, too, died, bequeathing his title and estate to his son Prince Anton. Unlike his father, Anton had no great love for music. Under the terms of Prince Nikolaus's will, Haydn retained a pension and the title of *Kapellmeister*, but his duties were significantly reduced. For the first time in nearly four decades, he found himself with some time on his hands and the freedom and financial wherewithal to make choices about using that time.

A few hundred miles away in the German city of Cologne, the entrepreneur Johann Peter Salomon read of Prince Nikolaus's death in the newspapers. Immediately grasping the significance of the change in Haydn's circumstances, he altered his itinerary posthaste and made for Vienna, where he contracted with Haydn for the first of two historic trips to London. Salomon and Haydn left for England on 15 December, 1790, but not before Haydn had completed the set of six quartets published as Opus 64.

Though Op.64 are not Haydn's final quartets, they are fully mature works, written when he was 58. Haydn scholar H.C. Robbins Landon considers Op.64 to be works of consolidation rather than innovation. He describes them as having an "easygoing amiability and a marked tendency to re-examine and re-use old ideas." Haydn was building upon skills and ideas he had already mastered. Rather than breaking new ground, he was exploring familiar territory more thoroughly. (The same observation could be made about most of Mozart's music, particularly the ten late string quartets.)

The "Lark" Quartet may well be the most frequently performed of all the Haydn quartets, which is saying a great deal, since Haydn wrote more than 80 of them. Its nickname derives from the soaring first violin melody of the opening movement. But the appeal of the *Allegro moderato*, and its melodic genius, is that it has *two* main themes, so beautifully integrated that we barely realize Haydn's cleverness in merging them. The effect is deceptively simple, for this is a highly contrapuntal movement with an embarrassment of melodic riches.

Switching to the dominant key of A major for the *Adagio cantabile*, Haydn awards the *arioso*-style melody to the first violin. He is more democratic in the third movement, whose scales and arpeggios are shared among all four players. The Menuetto is marked by an unusually long second section that shifts the emphasis somewhat from simple ternary form [A-B-A] to something more akin to development.

D major is the most violinistic of keys – witness the remarkable number of violin concerti written in D – and Haydn fully exploits is violinistic potential in the finale. A *moto perpetuo* movement, it spotlights the first violinist's technique. Even more than in the first movement, Haydn experiments with *fugato* sections. A passage in D minor is particularly striking, allowing all three of the lower instruments a chance at the dizzying runs. When the tonic major returns, the players are now in playful competition with one another, bringing the quartet to a lively and satisfying close.

String Quartet No.5, Sz.102, BB110 (1934)

Bela Bartók (1881-1945)

At almost half an hour long, the Fifth Quartet might seem like a daunting dose of Bartók. In fact, it has achieved its place in the repertoire more easily than either the Third or Fourth Quartets, and remains a favorite of performers. Among Bartók's six contributions to the string

quartet literature, only his Second Quartet is played more frequently than this one.

Like the Fourth Quartet, the Fifth Quartet is in an arch form. This means that the outer movements (I & V, and II & IV) are structurally and thematically related to one another, and that the central movement functions as a psychological anchor and fulcrum of the entire work. Bartók chose to make the central movement a scherzo in this quartet, flanking it with two slow movements, the inverse of the pattern he chose for the compact Fourth Quartet.

Though this work is not really "in" any key, we can think of it as "on" B-flat. It both opens and closes on that pitch, and B-flat functions as a sort of homing point throughout the piece. Far more striking than a key center is Bartók's extensive use of contrapuntal writing, particularly canons. His heavy reliance on imitative devices as a compositional technique lends this quartet an often dense texture. In the latter two movements, he frequently inverts melodic material introduced in the first two movements.

While the entire quartet is filled with inventive sonorities, unusual string techniques and rhythmic hammering, a few isolated observations will help to focus the listening experience. For those conversant with sonata form, the first movement adheres to it. The first slow movement, Adagio molto, opens with spooky trills and uncertain phrase fragments as introduction, then settles into a Bartókian chorale with violin melody as cantus firmus above. In itself this movement is a mini-arch form, containing a slightly nervous middle section before returning to the mysterious questions of the opening measures.

Bartók's Scherzo is subtitled "in the Bulgarian style," which in this case means that the meter is 4+3+2 eighth notes per measure, not at all the same as 9/8 because of the irregular emphases. The cello's pizzicato opening sounds a bit jazzy until the ensemble enters, when we realize that Bulgarian folksong, as well as rhythm, has served to inspire the composer.

Finally, toward the end of the last movement, listen for a brief passage, unmistakably in A-major, with a banal theme delivered by the second violin. In the score these 22 quick measures are marked Allegretto, con indifferenza. The violist, imitating an Alberti bass, is instructed to play meccanico. Was Bartók playing a joke on us? or on critics who found his music too strident and dissonant? In the context that surrounds it, this childlike passage has even greater shock value. Hearing it, we realize how accustomed our ears have become to the eastern European sounds of Bartók's music.

Quartet in E minor, *"Z meho zivota"* ("From my life") (1876)

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

Like Beethoven, Smetana suffered from deafness, the greatest tragedy for a musician. Though the onset of the hearing problem occurred somewhat later in his life than in Beethoven's, Smetana had lost most of his hearing by age 50. He was completely deaf when he composed this quartet, his first. The work is indisputably biographical, more forthrightly so even than the Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique*. Smetana provided posterity with an explicit program for his quartet in a letter to his friend Josef Srb-Debrnov. The composer's own words serve as the best

introduction to the music.

> I shall not be in the least offended if this style does not find favor or is considered contrary to what was hitherto regarded as quartet style. I did not intend to write a quartet according to recipe. . . . As a young beginner I worked sufficiently hard to acquire thorough knowledge and mastery of musical theory. With me the design of every composition depends upon its subject. And so this quartet, too, shaped its form itself. I had wanted to give a tone picture of my life.
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> First movement -- the call of fate -- the main motif -- into the struggle of life. The love of art in my youth; romantic mood, in music as well as in love and life in general; an inexpressible yearning for something that I could neither name nor imagine clearly, and also a warning...of my future misfortune....It is that fateful ringing of the high-pitched notes in my ear which announced my coming deafness in 1874. I put this in as it was so fateful for me.
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> Second movement -- *à la polka* -- takes me back to the happy times of my youth, among the country people as well as among the people of higher classes (*Trio, meno mosso*, in D-flat) where I strewed the whole world with dance pieces, and was myself well-known as an enthusiastic dancer. It also describes my love of traveling; in the viola and later the second violin I marked `*à la tromba posthorn*.'
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> Third movement: reminds me of the happiness of my first love to the girl who later on became my faithful wife.
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> Fourth movement: knowledge of how to make use of the element of national music, joy at the success of this course up to the time it was interrupted by the catastrophe -- ominous for me -- of the beginning of deafness, a glance toward the sad future, then comes a brief sign of improvement, but, at the thought of the beginning of my career, nevertheless sadness. Roughly this is the aim of this composition, an almost private one, and therefore purposely written for four instruments which...talk to each other in an intimate circle of friends of what has so momentously affected me. No more.

And no less. As remarkable as this revealing letter is the music itself, which would stand admirably as a quartet even without its very personal program. Basically it is in a four-movement classical format with the outer two movements in sonata form. Its second movement, a glorification of the polka, functions as a scherzo. The pronounced dance rhythms lend themselves to exaggeration; the contrasting *meno mosso* is downright sultry! Smetana's slow movement begins with an elegiac cello solo, whose emotional and expressive heights are

sustained by the full quartet in a ringing chordal climax. The composer here offers an encomium to his first wife, who died of tuberculosis in 1859.

Not even Smetana's description in the letter quoted above fully prepares one for the shock of the high E that interrupts the irresistible Bohemian dance. His extensive experience in opera stood him in good stead in the dramatic design of this quartet. The emotional power of this work is gripping both as absolute music and as autobiography.